

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
*** Number 40: Web Ad Blockers ***

This week, Kevin reviews two programs that will block ads on the World Wide Web.

Advertisements on the web are nothing new. Someone probably dreamt up the idea of banner ads about three minutes after Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web. Now, web ads certainly aren't the worst way to market goods and services on the Internet: they're infinitely preferable to junk e-mail. But you don't have to like web ads, and you don't even have to see them thanks to software that works with your browser to block advertisements.

These programs work in the background as your browser displays web pages. When a web page contains a graphic that looks like it might be an ad, the program blocks it before your browser can download it. Because your browser doesn't have to download as many graphics, blocking ads can speed up your web browsing experience considerably -- especially if you have a slow Net connection. Even if you have a fast connection, it can be nice to have that much less clutter in your web browser.

The people who create web sites can make the case that all those ads pay for the fine information that you get from the Net. True, but that doesn't stop us from using the TV mute and VCR fast-forward buttons to avoid television commercials, does it? I'll steal a quote from my colleague Mary Eisenhart: "While this reminds me a bit of last decade's war of escalation between copy protection and copy protection breakers in the software market, it points out pretty clearly that the old model of readers passively willing to consume ads as the price of getting what they want is not only noxious as we've always known, it doesn't work, when they can avoid the ads entirely."

A popular anti-advertisement tool for Windows is AdsOff! The program works with Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Internet Explorer to block advertisements and browser windows that pop up unbidden (such as ads that appear whenever you visit a homepage at GeoCities.com). It is \$15.95 shareware, available from <http://www.intercantech.com>.

You can ask AdsOff! to suppress all ads or just large banner ads, and you can control how it will deal with removed ads. (It can display an empty spot where the ad was to be, show the ad as text or remove it entirely.) The program has three levels of filters -- from strong (which will remove anything that smells remotely like an ad) to weak (which errs on the side of caution but removes fewer ads).

AdsOff! does an admirable job of blocking ads. A handful of banners slipped past the gate during my tests, although the majority of them never saw the light of day, especially at the stronger filtering levels.

The folks who created AdsOff! have also released a free program called OnTrack! (what's with all the exclamation points?) OnTrack! will disable browser windows that pop up automatically (like those GeoCities ads). It doesn't block banner ads, it's just a one-trick pony for those of us who can't stand those pop-up windows.

There are ad-blocking tools for Macintosh users, too. One program that I've had success with is WebFree (<http://www.falken.net/webfree/>). It's a \$20 shareware

control panel that works with any web browser -- it can block banner ads, animated GIFs, blinking text and browser cookies. (I disabled everything except cookies, which don't bother me. For information about cookies, read NetAnswers Internet Extra #9.) WebFree doesn't offer as many options as AdsOff! -- you can't block only large ads, for instance. There's no filter strength setting as with AdsOff! -- instead, WebFree has an explicit list of filenames and URLs to block (if your browser is asked to display an image from a directory called ad-banners, for example, WebFree will block it). You can modify its list of forbidden files if you're so inclined.

Like AdsOff! WebFree can let the occasional ad slip by undetected. But the control panel provides an interesting statistics box: in less than an hour of surfing, the program blocked nearly 100 images and 18 animated GIFs. Can't say that I missed them one bit.

It can be nice to remain blissfully unaware of all those ads as you surf. After a few days using either program, you may forget that you're using it at all. After all, there are very few ads to remind you.

=*=*= SOFTWARE MENTIONED IN THIS ISSUE =*=*=

AdsOff! and OnTrack! (for Windows): <http://www.intercantech.com>

WebFree (for Macintosh): <http://www.falken.net/webfree/>

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The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet New Users Forum (GO INETNEW) in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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